

Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)

Frequently Asked Questions

Foothold Technology's AWARDS Software

Note: This FAQ is for the Indiana "Balance of State." The Indiana Balance of State covers all of Indiana except for Marion County. If your agency is located in Marion County, please contact CHIP at 317-630-0853 for more information.

1. What is the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)?

HMIS is a computerized, web-based data collection system that tracks the nature and scope of human service needs at an individual agency as well as across a Continuum of Care. HMIS is specifically designed to capture uniform client level data over time to understand the characteristics and service needs of men, women and children.

2. Who is in charge of the HMIS?

The Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority (IHCDA) is responsible for implementing the HMIS. IHCDA organizes trainings, user groups, and technical support. IHCDA is also the liaison between the user agencies and Foothold Technology, the HMIS software vendor.

3. Who should use HMIS?

HMIS is targeted towards homeless shelters, transitional housing programs for the homeless, permanent supportive housing programs for formerly homeless persons, and other homeless service programs. HMIS is also used by Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Programs (HPRP). Some agencies are required to use HMIS if they receive certain types of funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Other homeless programs are encouraged to use HMIS because it helps provide us with a more complete picture of homelessness.

4. What software do you use?

We use Foothold Technology's AWARDS Software. Foothold Technology is a software solution provider based out of New York City and they provide the technical support for the database.

5. How much does HMIS cost?

HMIS is subsidized by HUD and IHCDA, so there is no cost at all for homeless service providers.

6. How do I sign up and how do I get a user name?

Anyone wanting to use HMIS will need to attend a New User Training Sessions. You can register for the New User Trainings by visiting the "Training Calendar" section of our website. Each person will also need to fill out a copy of the "User Code of Ethics" and fax it back to us. That document can be found on the "Important Documents" page.

7. How many people at our agency can use HMIS?

Each agency can have up to 15 users at no cost. Each person will need to have their own username. We cannot allow people to share their usernames or passwords.

8. Can Domestic Violence programs user HMIS?

No. Domestic violence programs are prohibited from using HMIS according to the Violence Against Women Act of 2005.

9. What if my agency is a faith-based organization?

Faith-based organizations can have the same benefits of using HMIS as any organization. This includes the same access to training, onsite assistance, and technology funds. In addition HMIS is being customized to provide greater resources to faith-based organizations.

10. What is HMIS training like?

A general HMIS training takes about 2 and a half hours. It covers basic HMIS functions like Client Intake, Services, and Discharge. More advanced training is also available. Most of our trainings are offered via webinars so you can attend them from your office. Some of the trainings are conducted live in our Indianapolis office or regionally if demand is high enough. The webinars use the GoToWebinar.com software, so the first time you attend a webinar you will be required to install a small applet. You will also need to call in to a conference line to hear the audio portion of the webinar. During webinar trainings you are generally following along as the training demonstrates the user of the system. Periodically you will be asked to answer questions as a review of what you have learned. Attendees are strongly encouraged to take detailed notes and to download the Training Outline found on our website.

11. Who should attend HMIS training?

Everyone at your agency who will be using the HMIS should attend HMIS training, as well as anyone who will be collecting information about your clients using paper surveys.

12. Do I need to have AWARDS installed on my computer?

No. AWARDS is entirely web-based. All you need is an Internet connection.

13. What type of Internet connection do I need?

HMIS will work with a dial-up connection, suggested at 56K. According to HUD tests that compared all HMIS products, the Foothold Technology HMIS ran the fastest on the slowest computer.

Of course, as with the rest of the Internet, the faster the connection, the faster the HMIS will run. Therefore, IHCDIA recommends using a "broadband" Internet connection, such as cable modem, DSL, or ISDN.

14. What if we don't have computers, printers or internet access?

Contact the HMIS Project Manager. Occasionally IHCDIA is able to find used hardware for agencies that wish to use HMIS but do not have the resources.

15. What are the benefits of using an HMIS?

HMIS has many potential benefits, such as:

- Better coordination of services
- Less duplication of intake and assessment
- Track client outcomes
- Print reports at the touch of a button
- Analyze data by population, subpopulation, gender, age, etc.
- Generate an unduplicated count of persons served
- Educate your community with good, solid, numbers
- Use data to communicate more effectively with funders and donors

16. Can you give me some specific examples of these benefits?

- A supportive housing program analyzed their HMIS data by subpopulation and discovered that clients who were also military veterans had a much shorter length of stay than any other subpopulation. The agency realized there was a need to develop better collaborations with local veteran's service organizations. This issue would not have been discovered without the ability to analyze data using HMIS.

- A homeless program administrator routinely spent over 40 hours preparing their HUD Annual Progress Report (APR). With HMIS, the administrator simply clicks on a button that says "Print APR." The entire process takes less than five minutes. By using the HMIS, administrative time is significantly reduced, allowing staff to spend more time working directly with the clients.

- The United Way calls and wants to know the average age of a homeless person in your community. They want to use the information as the centerpiece of their annual giving campaign. HMIS can be used to quickly generate information needed by funders.

17. What are the risks of HMIS?

The main risk of HMIS revolves around privacy and confidentiality. To ensure that information in HMIS is kept secure we regularly audit agencies to make sure they are following all security guidelines. Each user will be given their own username and password and we are able to audit a user's activity should there be a suspected breach of confidentiality.

HMIS is a Client-Choice system, meaning that the clients have the choice of keeping their data confidential or sharing their information with other partner agencies. Client's must sign a release in order to share their information. The benefit of sharing information is that other agencies will be able to pull up their data and will not need to ask the same questions each time a client presents for services. However, it is important that staff make sure the client's understand their rights. More often than not, consumers are more concerned with getting food and shelter than with safeguarding their data and may be willing to sign anything put in front of them if it is not explained carefully in language that they will understand.

The HMIS has several built-in security precautions. First, the HMIS software has a multi-level "permission" structure governed by passwords. A password allows the user to see only the data that is relevant to them. The systems also uses 128 bit encryption technology - the same technology used for online banking - to render the database unreadable to anyone who attempts an unauthorized use of the system. In addition, IHCD has developed client consent forms (to inform clients of their rights) and Agency Partner Agreements, and a user Code of Ethics to ensure the data is used and collected responsibly. Lastly, the government will not see any client level data.

18. What if I don't have time to learn a new system?

IHCD understands that adopting a new technology can be a daunting task. HMIS staff is committed to helping your agency implement the HMIS in the way that best integrates with your normal workflow.

HMIS is expected to reduce the amount of administrative time spent on a program. Foothold Technology conducted a survey of their clients, and they indicated that administrative time spent on program reporting was reduced by as much as 80 percent. Imagine the amount of time you spend preparing summary data for your board meeting, combing through sign-in sheets, tallying up demographics. Using the HMIS, that same report could be printed in less than two minutes. Your agency may choose to use HMIS for a single program for a while, until you are comfortable with the technology. IHCD will be with you each step of the way, whether it is on the phone or onsite at your agency, at a user group meeting, or through newsletters and conference calls.

19. How can I stay up-to-date with what's going on with HMIS.

Check out the HMIS page on our website at www.indianahousing.org. Announcements are posted periodically on our website and sent out through the HMIS Messaging system to current users.